

## **Challenges for Thai OTOP Community Enterprises: Experiences from Thailand and Japan, A Comparative Study**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the ways Thailand adapted Japan's OVOP (One Village One Product) scheme to create its OTOP (One Tambon One Product) plan for community economic development. This comparative study of community enterprise experiences in Thailand and Japan on the development, policy, subsidization and business development of small communities finds a variety of factors, such as: (1) the Thai community entrepreneur does not embrace a culture of entrepreneurship in adhering to contractual agreements, while Japanese community entrepreneurs adhere to their contracts; (2) OTOP entrepreneurs make products that don't use local capital, natural resources or local culture, but instead copy products, while OVOP enterprises focus on uniquely local products; (3) Thai community entrepreneurs don't distribute products directly to the end-consumer, while OVOP entrepreneurs promote products directly to restaurants or launch them directly to consumers; (4) Thailand maintains an OTOP fund, which has led to non-productive loans, while Japan provides technical guidance and support for promotion and sales; (5) in Japan, local governments subsidize community enterprises with funds from the central government, whereas in Thailand, localities lack OTOP budgets and resources, all of which are held by the central government.

**Keywords:** *community enterprise, community development, One Tambon One Product, One Village One Product*

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### **1. Introduction**

Agricultural countries all over the world try to engage with farmers through a variety of policies, such as production, structural adaptation, the establishment of funds to aid farmers, the development of quality products, goods distribution, the products' value-added, and creating new and alternative businesses such as social enterprises. All of these policies promote the sustainable development of agriculture. Even if these efforts do not work in all agriculture societies, this paper posits that the social process of these policies will lead to the development of human resources and sustainable development in agricultural countries.

Since UNESCO launched the sustainable development concept nearly three decades ago, many developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America have adopted it successfully as a means to develop their agricultural communities. Japan's "One Village One Product: OVOP" is an example of this concept, though it is seen in different forms throughout the world. Thailand's version, "One Tambon One Product: OTOP," was initiated in 2001 by Thaksin Shinawatra, the prime minister at that time.

Studies by Okara (2009), Shakya(2011), Kurokawa (2011) and Murayama (2014) reveal four major differences between the original OVOP policy in Japan and OTOP practices in Thailand: (1) OVOP is a locally led, bottom-up movement, while OTOP is a centrally led, top-down policy; (2) OVOP does not have a designated budget, while OTOP is allocated an annual budget; (3) OVOP focuses on community development through promoting one local product, while OTOP focuses on advancing entrepreneurship by promoting a "No. 1" through an OPC (OTOP Product Champion) program that follows specified criteria; and (4) OVOP focuses on self-sufficiency, while OTOP involves continuous government assistance.

This paper examines the ways in which Thai OTOP community enterprises follow Japanese OVOP community enterprises, with the understanding that Thailand adopted and modified the OVOP concept for use in its own community economic development.

## **2. History of the OVOP Concept**

The earliest form of Japan's OVOP was developed in 1961 in Oyama Machi, the poorest village in Oita prefecture. Calling it the New Plum Chestnuts strategy, Hirumi Yahata, the president of the Oyama agricultural cooperative, devised a plan to transform agricultural production from rice to more lucrative plums and chestnuts in an attempt to raise local living standards. This attempt, whose motto was "Let's plant plums and chestnuts to go to Hawaii," proved to be successful by 1967 (Shakya, 2011).

What we now know as OVOP began as a community enterprise in 1979, when it was introduced and promoted as "Isson Ippin" by then-governor of Oita prefecture, Dr. Morihiko Hiramatsu.

### **2.1 The OVOP Concept of the Movement**

In the 1960s, Oita faced many problems, including population decline, as the local labor force of young people migrated to the large cities, where industrial mass production of inexpensive standardized goods offered employment (Moriyama, 2012). When Dr. Hiramatsu became prefectural governor in 1979, he discovered that the income of the remaining residents was low, and he wanted to devise a plan to alleviate their financial hardship. He recognized that an OVOP movement could achieve three goals for prefecture's impoverished residents (Moriyama, 2012).

The movement's initial and ultimate goal was to increase residents' per capita income and revitalize a rural society whereby everyone could feel proud and satisfied with life in their respective communities.

Secondarily, an OVOP plan could invigorate regions using two approaches: exogenous and endogenous development. While exogenous development attracting outside investment could not stimulate all areas, endogenous development in rural areas can make full use of their potential resources and capital, preserve the environment and develop localities by promoting semi-secondary industries. This is the spirit of the OVOP movement.

The movement's third goal aimed to build a society oriented around gross national satisfaction (GNS) that improved the quality of life, fostered the pursuit of a worthwhile life, and allowed for the coexistence of nature and humans. A GNS-oriented society is based on the philosophy of the sufficiency economy.

The OVOP movement was based on three principles: (1) local yet global, (2) self-reliance and creativity, and (3) human resource development.

The first principle promotes the concept of "Think globally, act locally." Citizens create specialty products as a source of local pride, such as agricultural products, tourist sites and folksongs. The community can use the local capital, i.e., the natural resources, culture and items unique to the area, to make and develop high value-added, globally marketable products that provide self-reliance and sustainability to the area. This principal belief in local knowledge and instinct is a buried treasure in each village. Residents choose their specialty product for the OVOP movement, not government officials, though all are aware of their potential. Local government provides technical guidance and support for promotion and sales.

Finally, human resource development is the movement's most important component. Oita prefecture established the Land of Abundance Training School to cultivate human innovation. The school has no assigned textbooks or teachers for the regional revitalization programs. Instead, local people who have succeeded in the movement are invited to be lecturers. Students, whose course of study is two years, include farmers' wives, agricultural cooperative staff, teachers and office workers.

From the 1960s to the present, Oita prefecture has accumulated various social capital, including OVOP groups, social organizations, prefectural farmer networks, urban and agricultural cooperatives, OVOP corporations, expansion of product associations, and tourism development organizations.

## 2.2 OVOP Movement in Other Countries

Many Asian, African and Latin American countries have successfully adopted OVOP concepts, with **China** the first nation outside Japan to adopt it. In 1980, Shanghai initiated the “One Hamlet One Product” (OHOP) plan.

**Cambodia** established a project on January 27, 2006. Close to a decade later, Cambodia still lacks experience in implementing this movement (Sopheaktra, 2008) and is constrained by a lack of market strategy, inadequate technology for processing and packaging, a lack of financial support, inadequate management skills and an absence of defined product standards.

**Indonesia** has been implementing its “Saka Sakti” or “One Regency One Product” plan, since 2000. Aquaculture production in a variety of economically important species is being promoted with small-scale operations by community groups, while on a large scale by cooperatives. The aquaculture cluster, however, is constrained by a lack of quality seeds (Ruchiwit, 2014).

**Malaysia** has been carrying out its movement since 2003 as a policy for integrating rural development to emphasize each district’s role in spearheading rural development for international markets. In 2004, under the banner One-District-One-Industry, Malaysia set up four product categories: industries, crafts, food and rural industry products. It is improving the wellbeing of Malaysia’s rural population Radiah (Kader, Mohamad, Azid, & Ibrahim, 2009).

A similar movement has been carried out in **Myanmar**, producing fishery products such as fresh snakehead and “belar” (*Trichogaster pectoralis*) fish. Local communities have also produced other fish products, such as sour fish, fish sauce, fish paste, dried and salted fish, and shrimp. Still, they lack technology and adequate marketing capability, though now products are being marketed by entrepreneurs (ASEAN Foundation, 2008).

The **Philippines** started its “One Barangay One Product” movement in 1993. Later, the name was changed to “One Town One Product,” aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and creating job opportunities for rural communities involved mainly with MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises). SULONG, or SME Unified Lending Opportunities for National Growth, provides capital for MSMEs under this movement (“Sulong” literally means advance or forward) (ASEAN Foundation, 2008).

**Vietnam** still has no legal framework regarding an OVOP-like plan, though local enterprises produce specific products such as fish sauce and other items through rural community efforts. The Ministry of Fisheries and Rural Development of Vietnam has negotiated with the World Bank for possible funding of the country’s FOVOP activities (ASEAN Foundation, 2008).

## 3. Adopting the OVOP Concept and Thai OTOP Community Enterprise Experiences

### 3.1 The Initiation and Social Context of the OTOP Project

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra went to Oita prefecture to study the OVOP movement of Dr. Hiramatsu, which he then adopted under the name “One Tambon One Product” (OTOP). The OTOP project, launched in 2001 as public policy, was significant in the election campaign of the government’s Thai Rak Thai party. It was intended as a policy to improve the economic situation at the grass roots level; however, the government did not adopt the whole principal, modifying it to meet the context of Thailand’s social capital in the 2000s. OTOP is said to be a successful project.

At the same time, the Eighth National Economic & Social Development Plan (1997-2001) had the revised aim of promoting sustainable development by using strategies to improve the quality of life, develop human resources and focus on people’s participation in strengthening community organizations. After the 1997 economic crisis, His Majesty King Bhumipol announced the Theory of Economic Self-Sufficiency to focus on greater resiliency and sustainability, and the government announced self-sufficient community economic projects in all provinces (Prayukvong, 2007).

The Ninth National Economic & Social Development Plan (2002-2006) adopted the “Sufficiency Economy” philosophy of His Majesty King Bhumipol as a policy guideline. The plan was to develop good governance, strengthen grass roots organizations and promote sustainable development in rural and urban communities. The plan was attempting to eradicate poverty and unequal income distribution through the development of social capital.

The Office of the Prime Minister issued regulations for the OTOP National Board 2001 according to five objectives: (1) to create jobs and income for communities, (2) to strengthen communities to become self-dependent, (3) to promote Thai wisdom, (4) to promote human resource development, and (5) to promote communities' creativity in developing products in harmony with the local culture and way of life.

### 3.2 The Development of OTOP in Thailand

The OTOP project was announced as an urgent policy in 2001 and is still in use today. The government is concerned with promoting activities to develop products and support sales promotion. Various activities have run continuously, such as annual product fairs and exhibitions, and the yearly search for an OTOP Village Champion (OVC). Thailand's development of OTOP has been as follows:

**Table 1** Development of OTOP in Thailand

<b>Year</b>	<b>The development of OTOP and Activities</b>
2001	-Government announced as an urgent policy -Established OTOP administration board -Placed under Community Development Department, Ministry of Interior -Village Development Fund established (July) for OTOP and many community groups
2002	-Rating system for OTOP products given one to five stars -Integrated: Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Industry, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and Ministry of Commerce
2003	-Quality Chosen for OTOP Product Champion (OPC): Local Link Global Reach -Community Development Department, support to link OTOP network to product development on Tambon level, District level, Provincial level, and Central government level
2004	-Enacted "Village Fund and Urban Community Act" -OTOP groups registered with Department of Agricultural Extension, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives for fund engagement. -29,385 OTOP products registered for grading (one to five stars) and 7,967 products were selected.
2005	-Established Small Medium Large Government Budget (SML Fund) -Enacted "Small and Micro Community Enterprise Promotion Act" -OTOP groups obtained support from the Tambon Administration Organization, the Community Development Department, and other government agencies. -Ministry of Commerce announced that the export value of OTOP goods reaches USD 1 billion (40 billion baht).
2006	-Search for OTOP Village Champion (OVC) -Highlighted OVC as a mechanism to promote and support development of Thai OTOP products -Five stars: 812 products selected
2007	-Knowledge-based OTOP activity
2008	-Entrepreneur promotion activity
2009	OTOP Tourism Village activity
2010	-Sustainability of OTOP activity -OTOP producers registered under OTOP: 33,228 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-based enterprises = 66.8%</li> <li>• Single-owner enterprises = 31.1%</li> <li>• Small and medium-sized enterprises = 2.2%</li> </ul>
2011-	-Market movement both domestic and international market
2014	-Business matching project

The government has supported activities, maintained funds, chosen quality products, promoted and supported the development of OTOP products for global markets, and worked to develop SMEs.

### 3.3 OTOP Sales Output, 2009-2013

Table 2 shows that earnings from OTOP increased from 7,180 million baht in 2009 to 72,243 million baht in 2013. Food products comprise the majority of OTOP products. The government has subsidized products continuously. The OTOP budget allocated 800 million baht in 2003, 1,500 million baht in 2004, 1,000 million baht in 2005 and 2006, 500 million baht in 2007, and 400 million baht in 2008 (Natsuda et al., 2011).

**Table 2** OTOP Sales Output, 2009-2013

Fiscal Year	OTOP Products					Total (baht)
	Food	Beverage	Fabric & Apparel	Apparatus, Decorations and Souvenirs	Herbal (non-food)	
2009	4,853,491,710.00	163,486,954.00	550,713,070.01	1,485,263,736.00	127,204,868.00	7,180,160,338.01
2010	29,509,066,445.00	3,133,326,603.00	9,173,871,567.00	15,322,660,946.00	2,296,381,909.00	59,435,307,470.00
2011	33,480,483,803.00	3,953,094,299.00	10,995,645,544.00	15,615,323,813.00	2,772,725,537.00	66,817,272,996.00
2012	33,622,500,013.45	4,280,207,123.00	10,741,448,111.00	15,416,838,431.39	2,743,698,791.25	66,804,692,470.09
2013	35,552,676,674.00	3,328,985,833.00	14,084,198,739.00	15,514,533,368.00	3,762,762,352.00	72,243,156,966.00

**Source:** Community Development Department, Ministry of Interior, Accessed on May 12, 2014

### 3.4 OTOP to be SMEs

In 2014, the Ministry of Industry collaborated with the Ministry of Commerce to develop OTOP businesses into SMEs by enhancing development of the production process, packaging, quality of products, management and five-star rating system. This operation would choose five-star rated products throughout the development: 152 products from 76 provinces (two from each province).

The Community Development Department reported that OTOP can increase SMEs by 1.55% of all products in 2012. OTOP entrepreneurs choose not to become SMEs for many reasons, including unfavorable tax measures and lack of government subsidies. An academician at the Ministry of Commerce has said, "The main reason OTOP entrepreneurs don't want to become SMEs is the government subsidy. If an OTOP becomes an SME, the government won't subsidize it. This is a problem for the Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Industry."

## 4. Challenges for Thai OTOP Community Enterprises

A comparative study of community enterprise experiences from Thailand and Japan has found that Japan devised a collaborative policy to enhance community enterprises. Its government is trying to revitalize rural areas via collaboration among enterprises in the agricultural, commercial and industrial sectors. Within these three sectors, the government promotes collaboration among six industries categorized in three groupings: (1) agriculture, forestry, and fisheries as the primary industry; (2) manufacturing as the secondary industry; and (3) retail as the tertiary industry. The goal is to create new value-added products using regional resources such as crops, food and food processing, and sales on products from agriculture production, the processing production and service activities (Hiroshi Ehara, interviewed on May 16, 2014).

The promotion of product development and market cultivation is a key to revitalizing rural areas through close collaboration between large industries and SMEs, including food processing and lodging service industries, as supported by the Act on Promotion of Business Activities by Collaboration between SME Operators and Operators of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, which came into effect in July 2008. The act was affected to realize the revitalization of local areas through employment creation and income improvement by not only using rural human resources and knowhow, but also by the broadening of multiple initiatives of collaboration among the agricultural, commercial and industrial sectors, which bring out originality and ingenuity. Regarding collaboration between agriculture and related industries, the

agricultural sector must link with various industries including, but not limited to, the food and restaurant industries and the tourism sector. Initiatives to promote the consumption of local produce through collaboration with local, distressed retail areas have made progress by using heretofore vacant shops.

Noshiro city provides a good case study of collaboration among agricultural, commercial, and industrial sectors through revitalization in local areas. This city in Akita prefecture established a Yu-ichi (evening market) by bringing agricultural products and processed food to previously unused shop in the local shopping area. Farmers bring and sell agricultural products and processed food by themselves. It has gained popularity among people on their way home from work and with housewives nearby. The shop has a long line of customers. Sales have increased two-fold compared with when the farmers sold in front of the post office (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2008). This collaboration among agricultural, commercial and industrial sectors is a new concept in Japan.

Actions such as the agricultural employment program that create jobs in rural areas in a Japan whose economy is in a severe state and declining rapidly following the worldwide financial crisis. Employment conditions are worsening on a decline in the number of job openings to the applicants. Due to an expectation of rising labor demand in the primary industry, the government is strongly promoting this field to advance employment numbers at a rapid pace.

In December 2008, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) established rural employment counseling counters. These consultation services receive many inquiries. The number of consultations and inquiries at this service (and similar services in prefectural governments) had reached 22,656 people between December 24, 2008, and April 15, 2009. The number of new workers recruited for the agricultural, forestry, and fishery sectors through the consultation services between December 2008 and April 15, 2009 was 1,370. In the agricultural sector, the government launched an employment program that provides support for agricultural corporations to undertake on-the-job training for individuals motivated to work. There are 1,226 participants in training courses at 1,057 agricultural corporations under this project. To foster individuals as leaders contributing to the revitalization of rural areas, the government launched "Inaka-de Hataraki-Tai." This project provides practical training regarding the revitalization of rural areas to urban dwellers interested in activities and settlements. Local governments subsidize this project. Agricultural corporations employ job applicants and implement practical training, with training costs of approximately 97,000 yen/month and a training period of 12 months or fewer.

A comparative study of community enterprise experiences between Thailand and Japan on development, policy, government subsidization and business development of small communities finds a variety of factors as follows:

#### **4.1 A Culture of Entrepreneurship**

The Thai community entrepreneur does not embrace a culture of entrepreneurship that honors commercial agreements, as farmers grow OTOP products in their spare time outside the main growing season. During the season, farmers abandon their OTOP production without respecting their promises to the market trade network; they merely break their contracts to continue growing and harvesting their crops. In Japan, community entrepreneurs honor their production contracts.

#### **4.2 The Problem of Products**

In making high value-added products, Thai OTOP entrepreneurs neither make products and goods that use local capital or natural resources, culture and items unique to the area, nor develop them into globally marketable products that could provide self-reliance and sustainability. Instead, they copy products made elsewhere by other entrepreneurs. In Japan, the focus is on community development through the promotion of uniquely local products.

#### **4.3 The Distribution of Products**

Thai community entrepreneurs don't distribute products directly to the end-consumer, but instead sell to middlemen or brokers. In Japan, OVOP entrepreneurs promote their products directly to restaurants or launch their products directly to consumers.

#### **4.4 Financial Discipline**

OTOP product promotion has so far operated as a centrally government-led, top-down policy. When a community entrepreneur initiates an enterprise, he or she borrows money from the national government-maintained OTOP fund. Unfortunately, most of this money is then spent on activities or objectives other than establishing a productive OTOP business, resulting in a non-productive loan. Moreover, these so-called entrepreneurs seem to have little interest in the products they say they intend to create and market.

In Japan, the community entrepreneur movement is locally led. Local knowledge and instinct are thought to be a buried treasure in each village. Residents choose their specialty product for the OVOP movement, not government officials, though all are aware of their potential. Local government provides technical guidance and support for promotion and sales.

#### **4.5 The Subsidization of Government**

In Japan, local governments provide subsidies to community enterprises with money from the central government. If a business meets application criteria, it can receive subsidies for certain projects. In Thailand, local governments lack an OTOP budget and resources, all of which are held by central authorities.

In the case of Moku Moku farm, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture has provided subsidies to build facilities for food processing. The farm has employed former Ministry of Agriculture staff and therefore has good connections and a good relationship with the ministry. Total costs for company activities at the farm are six billion yen, of which two billion yen came from central and local government subsidies. The subsidies can only be used for buildings and processing of food products and may not be used for accommodation facilities.

In Thailand, monetary subsidization has been held by central government agencies, such as the Department of Agricultural Extension, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Community Development Department, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Commerce. Local governments lack an OTOP budget and resources to develop each area.

### **5. Conclusion**

These days, local products in various countries generate income for their communities and cities, especially in tourist areas. However, local product development in rural or agricultural areas in many developing countries is likely to face problems related to various factors, mainly from trying to apply OVOP principles without fully understanding the concepts, and from applying those principles in a different context than its prototype, such as in societies, cultures, economies and political situations that are different from those in which OVOP was conceived. Therefore, cross-cultural implementation is necessary to make successful modifications.

Factors that have made OVOP a success in Japan are (1) being based on a culture of self-sufficiency, (2) making products that have unique characteristics in each area, and (3) developing networking between farmers and their prefectures, cities, agricultural cooperatives, NGOs, resident associations, chambers of commerce and tourism associations.

It is unclear whether Thailand's OTOP movement can solve rural and urban poverty and unequal income distribution, but it seems likely to increase local social capital. OTOP entrepreneurs whose businesses progress sustainably will inevitably develop social capital. They can develop human resources and knowledge management, which are the most important factors in enabling communities to become self-reliant and sustainable.

How can the OTOP movement solve poverty and unequal income distribution in rural communities? To find alternative ways, Thailand must 1) reconsider the principle of the OVOP concept; 2) rethink the ways in which funds are distributed; 3) go forward in efforts to collaborate with other economic sectors; and 4) help entrepreneurs distribute products directly to end-consumers.

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